



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20463

CERTIFIED MAIL
RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED

Mr. Bill Buckel

JUN 26 2009

Columbus, OH 43212

RE: MUR 6111
WOSU Public Media
Columbus Metropolitan Club

Dear Mr. Buckel:

On June 22, 2009, the Federal Election Commission reviewed the allegations in your complaint received on October 27, 2008, and the supplement to your complaint received on January 6, 2009, and found that on the basis of the information provided in your complaint, and information provided by WOSU Public Media and the Columbus Metropolitan Club, there is no reason to believe that WOSU Public Media and the Columbus Metropolitan Club violated the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended. Accordingly, the Commission closed the file in this matter.

Documents related to the case will be placed on the public record within 30 days. See Statement of Policy Regarding Disclosure of Closed Enforcement and Related Files, 68 Fed. Reg. 70,426 (Dec. 18, 2003). The Factual and Legal Analyses, which more fully explains the Commission's findings, are enclosed.

The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended, allows a complainant to seek judicial review of the Commission's dismissal of this action. See 2 U.S.C. § 437g(a)(8).

Sincerely,

Peter G. Blumberg
Assistant General Counsel

Enclosures
Factual and Legal Analyses

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FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION

FACTUAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS

RESPONDENT: Columbus Metropolitan Club **MUR:** 6111

I. BACKGROUND

The complainant in this matter alleges that the Columbus Metropolitan Club ("CMC") acted as a "political action group" when it cosponsored a debate with WOSU Public Media on October 16, 2008 featuring three candidates for Ohio's 15th District U.S. Representative seat, but excluded Libertarian candidate Mark Noble. The Complainant suggests that the debate was tantamount to a financial contribution to, or an expenditure on behalf of, the participating candidates because the debate gave them "preferential exposure," and asserts that CMC "should be required to [register with the Commission] and file the required forms." Further, the Complainant maintains that the participating candidates should report the alleged in-kind contribution in disclosure reports filed with the Commission. The Commission received a supplement to the original complaint on January 6, 2009 raising "new facts" supporting the original allegations, including that WOSU broadcast a radio "call-in show" on October 30, 2008 with the same three candidates that participated in the debate. The supplement also noted that Mr. Noble polled over 10,000 votes in the general election demonstrating that he was a serious candidate.

In its response to the original complaint, CMC maintains that it did not violate the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended, ("the Act") by excluding Noble from the debate. Specifically, CMC contends that as a tax exempt organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, it is legally permitted to stage candidate debates in accordance with the requirements of 11 C.F.R. § 110.13. CMC claims it

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adhered to these requirements because the participating candidates were chosen by its cosponsor, WOSU, who utilized "pre-established objective eligibility criteria" to determine which candidates "demonstrated a measurable chance of election to the office they [sought]" and would thereby be invited to participate in the debate. CMC Response at 2-3. In addition, CMC maintains that because the debate was a "nonpartisan activity designed to encourage individuals to vote or to register to vote" it is exempt from the Act's definition of a "contribution" or "expenditure." 2 U.S.C. § 431(9)(B)(ii); CMC Response at 3. CMC also notes that each year it hosts numerous forums and debates, and that in planning and hosting all events it strives to remain completely neutral and does not advertise, promote, endorse, oppose, or advocate any person, candidate, position or ideology. CMC did not submit a response to the complaint supplement alleging that the October 30, 2008 radio program also resulted in a contribution or expenditure. However, it appears that CMC had no role in the radio program.

Based on all available information, the Commission found no reason to believe that CMC violated the Act by making prohibited contributions to, or expenditures on behalf of the candidates participating in the debate in question, or by failing to register with the Commission and file disclosure reports, and closed the file as to both Respondents.

II. FACTUAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS

A. Background

In anticipation of the November 4, 2008, general election, WOSU and CMC entered into an agreement to cosponsor a debate featuring candidates vying for Ohio's 15th District U.S. Representative seat. Under the agreement, CMC was to promote

attendance, gather reservations, help with set design and collect and screen questions to be asked at the debate. WOSU was to choose the participating candidates and to host and broadcast the debate.

WOSU invited three candidates to participate in the debate on October 16, 2008. In addition, the same candidates participated in a WOSU Radio open line call-in show on October 30, 2008. It appears that the participating candidates for each of these events were chosen pursuant to WOSU's policy regarding political debates, implemented in March 2008. According to WOSU's debate policy, candidates demonstrating a measurable chance of election, defined as those receiving at least five percent support in a poll or public opinion survey conducted by an independent organization, would be included. Candidates not receiving the requisite support would be excluded because, according to the policy, "such participation will hinder the audience's understanding of the positions held by candidates who have a legitimate chance of winning election."

On October 8, 2008, Mr. Buckel, the complainant in this matter, phoned WOSU regarding Noble's exclusion from the scheduled debate. WOSU explained that Noble had been excluded because he had failed to receive the requisite five percent support. It also provided a copy of its policy regarding political debates in a letter sent to Mr. Buckel the same day. Subsequently, Mr. Buckel filed his complaint with the Commission.

B. The Columbus Metropolitan Club Did Not Violate the Act

The CMC is incorporated in the state of Ohio and is a 501(c)(3) organization. The Act prohibits "any corporation whatever" from making contributions or expenditures in connection with federal elections. 2 U.S.C. § 441b(a). However, 2 U.S.C.

§ 431(9)(B)(ii) exempts from the definition of "expenditure" "nonpartisan activity designed to encourage individuals to vote or register to vote." The regulation implementing the statutory exemption includes "funds provided to defray costs incurred in staging candidate debates in accordance with the provisions of 11 C.F.R. §§ 110.13 and 114.4(f)" within the exemption. See 11 C.F.R. §§ 100.92 and 100.154. Section 110.13(a)(1), in turn, permits "[n]onprofit organizations described in 26 U.S.C. §§ 501(c)(3) or (c)(4) and which do not endorse, support, or oppose political candidates or political parties" to "stage candidate debates in accordance with this section and 11 C.F.R. § 114.4(f)."

The regulations leave the structure of the debate to the discretion of the staging organization, provided that the debate includes at least two candidates, the organization does not arrange the debates in a manner that promotes or advances one candidate over another, and the criteria for candidate selection are objective and pre-established, under 11 C.F.R. § 110.13(b) and (c). For general election debates, staging organizations shall not use nomination by a particular party as the sole objective criterion to determine debate eligibility. 11 C.F.R. § 110.13(c). In its *Explanation and Justification for Corporate and Labor Activity*, the Commission stated that section 110.13 does not require that candidate selection criteria be reduced to writing or be made available to all candidates. 60 Fed. Reg. 64260-64262 (December 14, 1995). In past "debate" MURs, the Commission has considered a number of different criteria to have been acceptably "objective," including percentage of votes received by a candidate in a previous election; the level of campaign activity by the candidate; his or her fundraising ability and/or standing in the polls; and eligibility for ballot access. See MURs 4956, 4962, and 4963

(Gore 2000, *et al.*); MUR 5395 (Dow Jones, *et al.*); and MUR 5650 (University of Arizona).

In this matter, CMC, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, complied with the requirements of 11 C.F.R. § 110.13 when it cosponsored the debate in question. The debate featured three candidates, all of which purportedly met predetermined criteria for candidate selection. The criteria for candidate selection appear objective, requiring that participating candidates be legally qualified to hold the office for which they are campaigning, have achieved ballot access or actively campaigning as a write-in candidate, and receive five percent or more of support in a professionally conducted independent poll or survey.¹ CMC provided information indicating that just prior to the debate Noble had the support of approximately two percent of voters, according to a poll conducted by SurveyUSA on behalf of a local television network. The complainant does not dispute the results of the poll, or claim that Noble was otherwise eligible to participate in the debate pursuant to the criteria set forth by WOSU. Finally, the Complainant did not allege, nor is there information to suggest that the structure of the debate promoted or advanced one candidate over another. In fact, the organization's published mission is to "promote the open exchange of information and ideas among the

¹ The selection criteria submitted by WOSU in its response is slightly different from that submitted by CMC, even though CMC purports to be submitting WOSU's policy. For instance, CMC lists submission of campaign finance reports filed with a government agency as an objective criterion to measure candidate viability, while WOSU does not. Nevertheless, it appears that the minor differences between the criteria submitted by each are not material to our analysis here. In addition, the criteria submitted by both WOSU and CMC appear to apply only to third party candidates. It is not clear whether there are separate criteria for major party candidates that were not submitted to the Commission or whether there are no selection criteria for major party candidates and they are automatically invited to the debate. For general election debates, staging organizations cannot use nomination by a particular party as the sole objective criterion to determine debate eligibility. See 11 C.F.R. § 110.13(c). Nevertheless, information in the complaint responses indicates that the major party candidates met the selection criteria used for third party candidates (e.g. 5% polling threshold, ballot access). For instance, at the time of the debate, the two major party candidates had polled 47% and 42%, respectively, in public support. See CMC Response, Exhibit B.

residents of Central Ohio" in a non-partisan manner and to "provide a platform for the discussion of social, political, economic and cultural issues of concern to the community." <http://www.columbusmetroclub.org/Default.aspx?pageId=49310>, last viewed May 8, 2009. To this end, the organization organizes 60-70 events per year, billed as "forums and debates," to promote "diversity, discussion and debate." *Id.* There is no available information to suggest that the organization endorses, supports, or opposes any political candidates or political parties. In fact, most CMC forums and debates involve social topics unrelated to political candidates or political parties.

Accordingly, because the Columbus Metropolitan Club is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and complied with the requirements of provisions 11 C.F.R. § 110.13 when it hosted the debate, the Commission found no reason to believe that CMC violated the Act by failing to register with the Commission and file disclosure reports or by making prohibited and unreported contributions to, or expenditures on behalf of, the candidates participating in the debate.

FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION

FACTUAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS

RESPONDENT: WOSU Public Media MUR: 6111

I. BACKGROUND

The complainant in this matter alleges that WOSU Public Media ("WOSU") acted as a "political action group" when it cosponsored a debate on October 16, 2008 featuring three candidates for Ohio's 15th District U.S. Representative seat, but excluded Libertarian candidate Mark Noble. The Complainant suggests that the debate was tantamount to a financial contribution to, or an expenditure on behalf of, the participating candidates because the debate gave them "preferential exposure," and asserts that WOSU "should be required to [register with the Commission] and file the required forms." Further, the Complainant maintains that the participating candidates should report the alleged in-kind contribution in disclosure reports filed with the Commission. The Commission received a supplement to the original complaint on January 6, 2009 raising "new facts" supporting the original allegations, including that WOSU broadcast a radio "call-in show" on October 30, 2008 with the same three candidates that participated in the debate. The supplement also noted that Mr. Noble polled over 10,000 votes in the general election demonstrating that he was a serious candidate.

Respondent WOSU argues that it acted legally because it determined eligibility for participation in the debate based upon objective criteria outlined in a predetermined policy, and explained that Noble was not invited to participate because he did not meet those criteria. WOSU submitted a copy of its debate guidelines regarding the inclusion of third-party candidates in political debates to demonstrate that its eligibility criteria are based on indicators of electoral support and are viewpoint neutral. WOSU explains that

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the guidelines seek to ensure that voters "see and hear as much as possible from candidates who have a legitimate chance of being elected." WOSU Response at 4. The selection criteria require that a candidate is: (1) a legally qualified candidate that has publicly announced his/her intention to run for the office and qualified for the ballot, or actively campaigning as a write-in candidate (demonstrated by having a staffed campaign headquarters and receiving press coverage), and (2) has received at least five percent or more of support in a professionally conducted public opinion survey by an independent pollster. WOSU Response attachment A; *see also* Complaint Attachment A.¹ WOSU noted that Mr. Noble did not reach the 5% polling threshold and thus was not invited on that basis. However, WOSU also points out that one third party candidate met the 5% requirement and participated in the debate.

WOSU submitted no additional response when provided with a copy of the Complaint supplement alleging that the October 30, 2008 radio program also resulted in expenditures. However, according to the Complainant, when a caller asked why Noble was excluded from the radio show during the show itself, the host read WOSU's policy

¹ The selection criteria submitted by WOSU in its response is slightly different from that submitted by Columbus Metropolitan Club ("CMC"), the debate co-sponsor, even though CMC purports to be submitting WOSU's policy. For instance, CMC lists submission of campaign finance reports filed with a government agency as an objective criterion to measure candidate viability, while WOSU does not. Nevertheless, it appears that the minor differences between the criteria submitted by each are not material to our analysis here. In addition, the criteria submitted by both WOSU and CMC appear to apply only to third party candidates. It is not clear whether there are separate criteria for major party candidates that were not submitted to the Commission or whether there are no selection criteria for major party candidates and they are automatically invited to the debate. For general election debates, staging organizations cannot use nomination by a particular party as the sole objective criterion to determine debate eligibility. *See* 11 C.F.R. § 110.13(c). Nevertheless, information in the complaint responses indicates that the major party candidates met the selection criteria used for third party candidates (e.g. 5% polling threshold, ballot access). For instance, at the time of the debate, the two major party candidates had polled 47% and 42%, respectively, in public support.

regarding candidate debate selection to explain how the call-in show's guest list was derived.

Based on all available information, the Commission found no reason to believe that WOSU violated the Act by making prohibited contributions to, or expenditures on behalf of the candidates participating in the debate in question, or by failing to register with the Commission and file disclosure reports, and closed the file as to both Respondents.

II. FACTUAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS

In anticipation of the November 4, 2008, general election, WOSU and the Columbus Metropolitan Club ("CMC") entered into an agreement to cosponsor a debate featuring candidates vying for Ohio's 15th District U.S. Representative seat. Under the agreement, CMC was to promote attendance, gather reservations, help with set design and collect and screen questions to be asked at the debate. WOSU was to choose the participating candidates and to host and broadcast the debate.

WOSU invited three candidates to participate in the debate on October 16, 2008. In addition, the same candidates participated in a WOSU Radio open line call-in show on October 30, 2008. It appears that the participating candidates for each of these events were chosen pursuant to WOSU's policy regarding political debates, implemented in March 2008. According to WOSU's debate policy, candidates demonstrating a measurable chance of election, defined as those receiving at least five percent support in a poll or public opinion survey conducted by an independent organization, would be included. Candidates not receiving the requisite support would be excluded because, according to the policy, "such participation will hinder the

audience's understanding of the positions held by candidates who have a legitimate chance of winning election (sic)." WOSU Response at 2.

On October 8, 2008, Mr. Buckel, the complainant in this matter, phoned WOSU regarding Noble's exclusion from the scheduled debate. WOSU explained that Noble had been excluded because he had failed to receive the requisite five percent support. It also provided a copy of its policy regarding political debates in a letter sent to Mr. Buckel the same day. Subsequently, Mr. Buckel filed his complaint with the Commission.

A. WOSU Public Media Did Not Violate the Act

1. Debate

The Commission's regulations provide that "[b]roadcasters (including a cable television operator, programmer, or producer), *bona fide* newspapers, magazines and other periodical publications may stage candidate debates in accordance with [section 110.13] and 11 C.F.R. § 114.4(f), provided they are not owned by or controlled by a political party, political committee or candidate." 11 C.F.R. § 110.13(a)(2). In its Response, WOSU explains that Ohio State University owns and operates WOSU, and as an instrumentality of the State of Ohio, it is not controlled by any candidate, political party or political committee. The organization operates a public radio and television station in Columbus, Ohio, and is a member station of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). Thus, as a broadcaster, WOSU may sponsor candidate debates pursuant to section 110.13(a)(2) without making a contribution or expenditure to the extent that it complies with the rules in sections 110.13(b) and (c). *See* MUR 6072 (Northland Regional Chamber of Commerce, *et al.*). At the debate in question, it appears that WOSU complied with the Commission's debate staging criteria at 11 C.F.R. § 110.13(b) and (c)

by including at least two candidates and not promoting one of them over the other, and by selecting debate participants based on pre-established, objective criteria.

Accordingly, because WOSU complied with the requirements at 11 C.F.R. § 110.13, the Commission found no reason to believe that WOSU Public Media violated the Act by failing to register with the Commission and file disclosure reports or by making prohibited and unreported contributions to, or expenditures on behalf of, the candidates participating in the debate.

2. Radio Call-In Show

The Act defines "contribution" and "expenditure" to include any gift of money or "anything of value" made for the purpose of influencing any election for Federal office, but excludes any cost "incurred in covering or carrying a news story, commentary, or editorial by any broadcasting station (including a cable television operator, programmer, or producer), ... unless the facility is owned or controlled by any political party, political committee, or candidate." 2 U.S.C. § 431(8)(A)(i), (9)(A)(i), and (9)(B)(i); 11 C.F.R. §§ 100.52, 100.73, 100.111(a), and 100.132. This exclusion is known as the "press exemption." or "media exemption." The term "anything of value" includes in-kind contributions. 11 C.F.R. § 100.52(d)(1).

In applying the press exemption, the Commission first asks whether the entity engaging in the activity is a "press entity" within the meaning of the Act and the Commission's regulations. In determining whether an entity is a press entity, the Commission has focused on whether it is in the business of producing on a regular basis a program that disseminates news stories, commentary, and/or editorials. See Advisory

Opinions 2008-14 (Melothe, Inc.), 2007-20 (XM Satellite Radio Inc.), and 2005-19 (The Inside Track). Second, the Commission, in determining the exemption's scope, asks (a) whether the press entity is owned or controlled by a political party, committee, or candidate; and, if not, (b) whether the entity was functioning within the scope of a legitimate press entity at the time of the alleged violation. If the press entity is independent of any political party, committee, or candidate, and if it was acting as a legitimate press entity at the time of the alleged violation, it is exempt from the Act's restrictions on corporate contributions and expenditures, and the Commission's inquiry should end. *See Reader's Digest Association v. FEC*, 509 F. Supp. 1210, 1215 (S.D.N.Y. 1981); *FEC v. Phillips Publishing*, 517 F. Supp. 1308, 1312-13 (D.D.C. 1981); Advisory Opinions 2008-14 (Melothe, Inc.), 2005-19 (The Inside Track), and 2005-16 (Fired Up!).

The complainant seems to suggest that the radio call-in show was another debate featuring the same candidates that participated in the previously televised debate and that, once again, WOSU wrongfully excluded Noble from this debate. According to the complaint, the host of the radio program even cited the WOSU debate selection criteria during the radio broadcast in response to a question concerning Noble's exclusion from the program. Notwithstanding whether this was a "debate," it appears that the radio show was a press activity and is therefore exempt from the definition of expenditure or contribution by the "press exemption."

WOSU Radio is a press entity because it regularly produces and airs news stories and talk shows. In addition to local programming such as the debate in this matter, WOSU airs numerous national news and public affairs programs including "On Point," "On the Media," "Talk of the Nation," and "Weekend Edition."

<http://www.wosu.org/radio/> (last viewed June 9, 2009). Further, WOSU specifically denies that it is owned or controlled by any political party, political committee, or candidate, and neither the complaint nor the available evidence suggests otherwise. Finally, the October 30, 2008 radio call-in show constituted legitimate press activity. It featured political candidates which answered questions from listeners regarding the candidates' positions regarding issues of local importance. The fact that the program featured political candidates is not dispositive, because featuring interviews of candidates on-air falls within the bounds of the press exemption. *See, e.g.,* MUR 5569 (John and Ken Show).

Accordingly, because the alleged activity in this matter falls within the press exemption, the Commission found no reason to believe that WOSU Public Media violated the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended, by making prohibited and unreported contributions to, or expenditures on behalf of, the candidates participating in the radio call-in show, and close the file.